

This Veterans Day, on 11-11-11, communities all over America will pause in appreciation of the men and women who have served our country in uniform. Our freedom depends on the Americans who are willing to defend it, and we are very fortunate in Missouri to have veterans in every community and nearly every family.

In and out of uniform, American servicemembers and veterans make invaluable contributions to our communities, as volunteers, as role models, and as defenders of a tradition of service that characterizes who we are and how much we love our country.

But when it comes time to appreciate our veterans, it's well worth keeping in mind what we can do for them, as citizens of the grateful nation they have sacrificed to protect.

The newsmagazine 60 Minutes aired a moving piece last week that featured a program under which disabled veterans could return to Iraq, rejoining the ranks of their fellow troops and visiting the places where they were injured. The trips promote healing, but they also remedy the incredible disconnect between blacking out from blood loss on the Iraqi field of battle and waking up three weeks later in Walter Reed Army Medical Center -- 6,192 miles away from Baghdad.

The architect of the program for these young veterans is not a servicemember or even a doctor, he is an advertising executive from Washington, DC, who regularly visited troops at Walter Reed and heard them say, over and over, that they wanted nothing more than to return to their units back in Iraq. He listened to them when medical staff said such a thing was impossible, and he understood.

In Southern Missouri, and in many places around the nation, there is an annual Honor Tour. Ours raises donations from the community which pay for veterans of World War II to visit the nation's capital. There, they see the monument erected to their service. They walk through the airport to an avalanche of applause, and they meet Americans -- perfect strangers -- who want nothing more than to thank them for their service. And if they come to Capitol Hill to visit their elected representatives, they see a black POW-MIA flag outside each office, proclaiming "You Are Not Forgotten."

Back home, no day like Veterans Day reminds all of our veterans that this is true. In schools, our students participate in programs to honor all the members of the community who have served in uniform. Some are inspired to follow in their footsteps by attending the nation's service academies or by enlisting in a branch of service. There is no greater tribute to our veterans than to follow in their footsteps.

Other places in our communities, like parks, cemeteries, and the many memorials and monuments to veterans in Southern Missouri, feature celebrations of the men and women who have left their homes to defend our freedoms. To get to these events, we might drive on highways named for a veteran.

Unlike Memorial Day, Veterans Day is an uplifting day – and it is a chance to say thank you to the veterans who sit around our dinner tables, live on our streets, work in our communities, volunteer for public service, and share with us their tradition of patriotism and pride, both in uniform and out of it.

There are many ways to say 'thank you,' but by honoring and serving American veterans in all these special ways, we let them know that their contributions to our nation are precious and sacred, and we love them for it. As a group of millions of regular Americans who have given so much to the country we love, they will always be our nation's first and best heroes.